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ABSTRACT

This paper presents arguments in favor of and against formalistic and realistic approaches in teaching/learning English in an English-speaking country. Within the formalism approach, the purpose of language teaching is to inculcate an intuitive grasp of the system of the target language. The ability to manipulate language rules is of prime consideration, with the ability to use language appropriately of secondary concern. Realism refers to an approach where the ability to use language in natural situations is the prime concern. A command of language forms is of interest only as it contributes to the ability to operate effectively in real-life language situations. It is suggested that language programs combine formalism (since linguistic forms must be learned through practice) and realism (since language is an activity related to human interaction and the exchange of information). (Author/JK)

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FORMALISM AND REALISM IN A TEACHING PROGRAMME

D.P.L. Dry

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Formalism and realism in a teaching programme. D.P.L. Dry
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The field of this paper is restricted to learners taking courses in English in an English-speaking country. In this situation they are in a position more akin to that of learners of English (other than native speakers) in a country where English is the official language, the classic location of the teaching of English as a second language. This situation contrasts with that of learners of English in a country where English is an entirely foreign language. To class the learners under discussion as learners of English as a second language is unusual, but many of the features of their condition are closer to those more usually classed as ESL than to those classed as EFL. This particular field is an important one, and deserves special consideration.

At the outset, there appears to be a great deal that can be said against the use of an over-formal approach in the case of people who come to an English-speaking country to learn or to improve their mastery of the language. Indeed, the prevailing wisdom is that such people require something which will enable them to operate as quickly and surely as possible in the language of real-life exchanges going on all round them. Bringing realism into the classroom appears to be quite obviously desirable, and a formal approach quite unnecessary and tedious.

It is important, before one becomes involved in the polemics of current debate on programme and syllabus design, to clarify the terms being used. The contrast being made here, which appears to bring out the essential differences of viewpoint between various contending parties, is one between "formalism" and "realism". It seems very likely that this contrast is an unexpressed and incompletely formulated undercurrent in the debate which has been conducted especially in the years which have followed the launching of the concept of "functional/notional" syllabuses. In fact, this opposition has simmered throughout the history of language teaching, and recent developments have served mainly to bring it to more conscious attention and invest it with the vituperative edge which seems inseparable from academic controversy. It is indeed probable that the acerbity of the attack on "structuralism" by the functional-notionalists arises at least in part from the fact that the latter see themselves as champions of "realism" against the "formalism" of the structuralists

For the purpose of this paper, I take "formalism" to refer to an attitude which regards the prime purpose of language teaching as being the inculcation of an intuitive grasp of the systems of the target language, to the extent of maintaining that the ability to manipulate the rules of the language is the overriding consideration, and the practical uses to which this ability may be put is of secondary interest to the pedagogue. It is important to disentangle this concept from any necessary connexion with structuralism, which maintains that a language syllabus should be organised in terms of increasing complexity of structure alone. It will be shown that a functional-notional approach can be every bit as formalist as a structural one, though structuralism tends by its nature towards a formalist approach.

By contrast, "realism" refers to an approach where the ability to use the language in natural language situations is the principal concern, and where the command of the forms of that language is interesting only in so far as it contributes to the ability to operate effectively in the language situations met in real life. Much of the propaganda of the advocates of functional - notionalism is devoted to the equation of their approach with realism, in that they tend to maintain that it alone can effectively equip learners to operate in real-life situations. It is becoming increasingly evident that this is in fact not exactly so, and that learners exposed to

current functional-notional syllabuses and teaching procedures are frequently no more able than those trained on structuralist lines to modify their speech behaviour in the outside world along the lines in which they have been drilled in the classroom.

The tradition of language teaching has been heavily formalist ever since the production of the earliest Greek grammars of the second century AD, which may be taken as the first evidence of systematic language teaching in the Western world, and from which the organised teaching of foreign languages throughout the modern world has been derived. One suspects, however, that in practice, and expecially outside the classroom in the domestic environment in which the major part of foreign and second language teaching took place until the educational systematisation of the nineteenth century, it has always been heavily influenced by realistic considerations. Indeed, before the nineteenth century, one may very well contrast the formalist bias of the teaching of Greek and Latin in the schools with the largely realist situation where contemporary living languages were learnt in a domestic environment by everyday contact with native speakers of the target language - whether these were servants, employees (governesses and tutors) or a foreign family with whom the learner lodged.

It is only where captive learners can be assembled to be drilled through the syllabus of a formalist examination system that the necessary incentive can be developed to ensure that a purely and rigidly formalist teaching programme can be adhered to by both learners and teachers. Although, as has been noted above, such a situation to some extent applied in Church schools and their successors from the early Middle Ages, it was only with the general application of an inclusive and compulsory education system in the nineteenth century that the full rigours of formalist teaching could be imposed.

From the point of view of the organisers of universal compulsory education, formalist teaching of languages (as of much else) has certain obvious advantages. The primary aim of such organisers is that the community which is paying for the education should receive value for money, and their task is to ensure that the process of education has a measurable and ascertainable output of a quality assessed by the best contemporary opinion as commensurate with the input. This means that inspection and examination have to be applied respectively to teachers and learners. It is clearly much easier and more precise to inspect the activity of a teacher to ensure that particular items are being presented in the way recommended by the best pedagogical opinion, and to examine the learners to see how far such items have been retained and can be reproduced on demand than to try to assess whether language learners can actually use these items in real life situations in an appropriate manner.

It has to be remembered in all discussion of the relation between formalism and realism that formalism provides the most easily standardised way of ensuring that a teaching programme is being adhered to and conveyed to the learners. The fact that a realist approach is inherently incapable of being assessed except in terms of the extent to which the learner can carry out transactions required by the learner in situations of interaction with native speakers of the target language makes a realist programme extremely difficult to test, real life being the untidy muddle that it is, with any degree of objectivity. The reliability of a system of testing depends on its validity - whether it tests what it purports to test - and its standardisation - whether it always and for all subjects tests what it purports to test - and it is extremely difficult to apply such a test to the ability of a speaker of a foreign language to operate effectively in it. If this is difficult, it is even more difficult to assess whether the activities of a teacher under observation conduce or not to such an ability.

Formalism is therefore in a very strong position, being able to maintain that only a formalist approach to syllabus construction and teaching methods can ensure that a reliable check is kept on the effectiveness of syllabus and teaching. Attempts to inject a greater element of realism into the process can be resisted on the grounds that they are at best cosmetic and at worst positively deleterious. Demonstrably sound teaching can only be based on the objective criteria of the acquisition of rules by the learner. The traditional teaching of Greek and Latin is the basis for all language teaching, since the teaching of these languages has been developed to a high degree of precision over centuries of experience.

If this is a tendency in the public sector, subject as it is to the values of the administrator and the accountant, its effects are also evident in the private, where one might expect that results in the form of language competence as the end-product would be of greater importance. However, where consumer ignorance is a major factor in the market - it may be said that the potential consumer of language courses knows rather less about the process of language acquisition than about solid state physics or Byzantine musicology - the pressures of accepted wisdom are of major importance. Firms or individuals buying language courses tend to evaluate such courses on formalist principles, requiring a demonstrable progress through a course book and a predictable outcome as their criteria of value for money. Once again, a formalist syllabus and teaching approach is strongly indicated.

Nevertheless, the realist critique constantly erodes the apparent monolith, and has two easy routes of entry. First, formalist teaching by itself is manifestly inefficient. Secondly, and partly contributory to the first, a purely formalist approach is mechanical and inhuman.

That the formalist approach to language teaching is inefficient when untouched by realist influences is manifested by the experience of public sector language teaching, where in the great majority of countries a vast input of money and time produces a very indifferent output. It is rare for a product of school language teaching to be in any way competent in the target language. It is also shown in the experience of the private sector, where, despite the pressures of an ignorant market, competence in real life exchanges does play an important part in the reputation of a school. The impulse towards a realist approach in both public and private sectors can be seen as an underlying factor in the wide acceptance and application of functional-notional syllabuses, which are perceived as more realist than those formerly obtaining.

There is also a very long history of attemts to inject realism into language teaching as a counter to the aridity of formalist methods. Formalism, with its emphasis on the acquisition of rules and vocabulary items seen as isolated or abstracted phenomena, treats human beings as computers - robots, automata - which can be programmed to produce predictable outputs in response to systematised stimuli. This places an inhuman burden on rote memory and ignores creativity and interpersonal contact, which are primary factors in language use. Realism attempts to inject into this inflexible system an understanding and apprehension of the fact that language is a device for communication between human beings in which rules are tools and not ends in themselves. A very early example of this impulse is the unfortunately ineffective use of literary texts in language teaching in an attempt to put some soul into an otherwise dreary and meaningless grind.

It is interesting however that attempts to increase the realist element in language teaching are constantly frustrated. Ideally, language learners

should, according to the realist critique, acquire the target language through real-life interaction in real-life situations. The models for the realist are those of the child acquiring its native language or the immigrant acquiring that of the host community for the purposes of everyday life and work. In the overwhelming number of cases of learners of a second or foreign language, neither of these models is relevant. The fact remains, however, that the appeal of the realist models to folk mythology is strong. Advertisements showing a language teacher with the caption "Look on her as your mother" testify to the appeal of the first; the frequently heard assertion "All you really need to learn a foreign language is six months in the country with a good grammar/phrase book/ dictionary" to that of the other. In fact, it is only in rare cases that unmediated exposure to the raw languages leads to effective language use. It is perfectly true that a language is best learnt by speaking it; it is unusual for a language to be learnt by simply chatting in it.

In fact, while an attempt can be, is being, and most certainly has been made to cause people to learn a language by purely formalist means, the converse is inherently impossible since exposure to the raw language is incompatible with the activity of teaching - i.e. causing to learn. Any teaching activity entails at least the selection, grading and appropriate presentation of material to the learner; to do otherwise would not be to teach. Those who have attempted to conduct a conversation class where all teacher direction is ruled out are witnesses to the stultifying and ineffective nature of such an operation, except in the case of very advanced learners. Similarly, any language teaching institution knows the drawbacks to the utilisation of linguistically naive and untrained teachers.

Observation of the behaviour of successful language learners also shows the necessity of an element of formalism in their procedures. Even in the case of infants acquiring their native language, where there is maximum motivation in what is in effect a full-time course extending over at least six years, there is ample evidence that mothers structure their language to adapt it to their children's needs and that the children themselves engage in formalist activities such as imaginary rehearsal of conversations and the repetition of sentences and phrases out of context and over extended periods of time. Similar behaviour is engaged in by successful learners of a second or foreign language after the acquisition of their native language. Indeed, it would appear that it is the neglect of these techniques by certain adolescents or adults, for various intrapersonal reasons, which accounts for the lack of success of certain aspiring learners of particular and identifiable personality types.

Moreover, formalism has behind it the concept that the understanding of, and automatic ability to manipulate, the formal system of the target language is the surest way of ensuring intelligibility and comprehension. That is, the ability to use the target language correctly means that the learner's utterances can be more easily understood, and the learner is more likely to be able to interpret the utterances of an interlocutor. This concept has been strengthened by recent thinking which stresses the importance of generative ability. According to this approach, the possible utterances in any language are infinite, and the ability to produce or interpret any given utterance can only be achieved by the application of generative rules. Since languages are so complex, it is unusual for an outsider to be able to derive the rules of a previously unknown language from the raw data. Even in the case of trained linguists specialising in the acquisition of little-known languages, certain formal techniques and procedures have to be applied to their informants before the rules can become clear; it is only

the exceptional person who can, unless neturally endowed with singular linguistic perception, deduce the rules of a language from the raw data.

A further discovery emphasises the importance of a command of the rules of the language in ensuring comprehension. The tympani of the ear vibrate at a markedly lower speed than the modulations of the air-stream issuing from the speech organs at normal speaking speed. In other words, no listener is capable of apprehending all the signals being emitted by a speaker. Nevertheless it is possible for a competent hearer to reproduce exactly what has been said. This is achieved because the hearer reconstructs, from those elements of the speech flow which have been caught, the whole utterance. This means that there is a mechanism in the brain which rehearses those sounds which have been heard and matches them against all the possible utterances which could have contained those sounds in that sequence with those time intervals until it arrives at the most probable utterance. That this is so can be observed by introspection where the number of sounds received is reduced by the interference of noise, as in a defective telephone line or bad radio reception. In such circumstances, the decoding of the signal is slowed to a degree which brings it to the threshold of consciousness, where it can be observed. One also perceives it in a language in which one is partially competent: one experiences a delay in decoding the utterances of the interlocutor, and frequently has to repeat the most probable utterance to see if that is in fact meaningful.

This reconstruction is done on the basis of the rules of the language already acquired, and, as just mentioned, often involves the reproduction of the utterance either internally or, in extreme cases, in overt speech. In other words, one hears what one can say, or, in more precise formulation, accurate comprehension of a received utterance, as opposed to the apprehension of its gist, is achieved only when one is capable of producing such an utterance oneself. Whether in fact one would produce such an utterance spontaneously is irrelevant; what matters is that one has the rule-based competence to produce it if required. Reception is grounded on production.

If one wishes to adieve proficiency in any activity, physical or mental, sporting, artistic or professional, the surest means is by constant practice, often decontextualised from the final performance. The golfer practising strokes, the footballer dribbling, the dancer at the barre, the pianist working five-finger exercises, are all engaging in formalist activities which are often far removed from the ultimate performance. In the same way, the language learner has to practise the production of sentences appropriate to given stimuli. A golfer whose activity is confined to match play or a singer who never sings except on stage or the concert platform will never get very far. So the language learner whose activities are confined to conversation is unlikely to acquire competence in the language. Formalism is an inescapable element in the acquisition of any skill.

At the same time, language is an activity essentially related to the interaction of human beings and the exchange of information between them. Unless this interaction forms part of a language course, the learner will never be able to use the target language effectively. Just as a structuralist approach too easily degenerates into the memorisation of rules, so a functional-notional approach too easily degenerates into an attempt to memorise fifteen different ways of asking someone to open the window. The teacher is a specialist in human relations, and should never allow a bandwaggon to become a juggernaut.